



The Canopy

Issue 2 / Volume 34 / Mar 2026



The Friends We Made There

Two evacuations, fifty years apart and the allies we kept leaving behind
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Jump a nuke? Ok, sarge...
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Inside Robin Sage, the Final Test of America's Green Berets.
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Chapter Officers

Position	Name
Chairman	Gary Blasczienski
Vice Chairman	Stephen Fern
Treasurer	Heath Davenport
Secretary	Vacant / Interim
Service Officer	Joyce Damon
Events Officer	Tony Alger
Recruiting / Villages	Tony Alger
Recruiting / Ocala	Tig Blackman
Canopy Editor	Ron Dahlgren

Upcoming Events and Historical Notes

March 14 @ 1300 hrs	Chapter Meeting	VFW Post 8083
March 17	St. Patrick's Day Parade	Spanish Springs
March 28	VFW MC Fund Raiser	(See VFW details)
April 5	Easter	The World Over
April 11 @ 1300 hrs	Chapter Meeting	VFW Post 8083
May 18-21	All American Week	Ft. Bragg, NC

From the Editor



This issue is the culmination of ten months worth of reporting. Contributor Matthew Richards and I interviewed several people for each of the stories you'll find in this issue. Special guest contributor Jack Murphy provides us with a history of a bonkers special program from years gone by.

I'm really proud of the material we have pulled together here. I hope you enjoy reading it and maybe learn something new.

The other exciting news is the Airborne Review is back this year! Our beloved All Americans will jump into Sicily Drop Zone instead of the traditional pass and review. Words can't capture how excited I am to share this with my children. This is the first Airborne Review they've ever seen. My daughter has seen our chapter doing a water jump, but this will be something different altogether. Fingers crossed that we get a whole battalion+ jumping!

This month's cover comes from Sgt. Kimberly Derryberry, 37th Infantry Brigade Combat Team. Taken June 27, 2012

Airborne! All The Way!

Ron Dahlgren

Editor, The Canopy

<https://www.the-canopy.org>

Chairman's Message

March is here and spring is coming with it. This is a time of renewal and new beginnings. Spring cleaning and growth. I am a believer that you never stop learning or growing and this is the time of year to set your goals for growing. The time of the New Year's resolution has passed, the time when most set the changes they want to make in life. This is the chance to build on what you have. As some of you know, I am an amateur photographer, but it is something I truly enjoy. To help me continue to grow, I will be signing up for some lessons.

I encourage everyone to find something they enjoy and continue to build on it. If you love to cook, find a community class or group to work with. There are locations within The Villages that will teach you to make wine or beer. Let it be something small or go big and shoot for the stars. This is the season to do it, this is your chance to be you, just being more as you do.

With the weather turning (maybe), there are also a lot of events happening this and following months. The Marion County Veterans Helping Veterans is having its inaugural Marion County Veterans Hall of Fame at the Southeastern Livestock Pavilion on March 19th at 6:00 pm. Other events include Dine to Donate: The Villages Honor Flight at Mallory Hill Country Club on March 10, from 11:00 am to 8:00 pm and the VFW Post 8083's Car and Bike Show on March 28th, from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm for the new roof fund. Keep an eye out for other events as we know more and more will be coming.

Finally, we have the upcoming St. Patrick's Day Parade on March 17th at 1:00 pm. Thank you, Heath for letting us know that the location has been moved to Lake Sumter Landing Market Square so we can all be at the right place. I hope everyone is looking forward to the picnic at Gary's Man Cave as much as I am. We will be pushing out more details, but as you all know it will be a great time.

Airborne!

Gary Blasczienski

Chairman

North Central Florida All-Airborne Chapter



10 Most Recent Canopy Boosters – Thank you for your support!

Galen Mitchell
John Kinney
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Ken & Linda Hall
Jerry & Robby Brust

Heath Davenport
Christopher Adams
Nick Harty
Regis Rossa
Darla & Jay Tatman

The Friends We Made There

By Matthew Richards



Asad, who is blurred for security reasons, arrived in the United States on September 10, 2025.

Photo courtesy of Chris Wells.

In April 1975, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu resigned on live television and said what no American wanted to hear. "Is an American's word reliable these days?" Nine days after the speech, Saigon fell. The helicopters lifted off from the embassy roof. Thousands of Vietnamese who had staked their lives on American promises watched them go.

Later Thieu elaborated to Anna Chennault in Taiwan after fleeing Vietnam. "It is so easy to be an enemy of the United States," he said, "but so difficult to be a friend." In defense of protecting Thieu, Henry Kissinger predicted the sentiment six

years earlier on a phone call with William F. Buckley Jr.: "It may be dangerous to be America's enemy, but to be America's friend is fatal."

Forty-six years passed. The helicopters came back. This time they hovered over Kabul.

The quotes resurfaced like shrapnel working its way out of an old wound. They circulated again because they fit again. The pattern had not changed. Only the names of the abandoned had changed.

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Chris Wells is a retired Green Beret colonel who spent years in Afghanistan. He is not a man given to speeches. He talks the way soldiers talk—short, factual, with the weight carried underneath the words. When the Taliban took Kabul on August 15, 2021, Wells did not wait for orders. No orders were coming.

"We started calling around," Wells said. "Guys in the 82nd, guys in the Marines, guys in JSOC, Task Force 160th. I even called a friend of mine up in the Pentagon. He was telling me everything he could. But it was pretty scattered."

Wells had spent his career building the kind of relationships Special Forces are trained to build. You go into a village. You drink the tea. You learn the names. You train the men to fight and you fight beside them. The rapport is the security. Without it you are dead. You earn trust. You keep it. Except the U.S. did not keep it.

Wells founded the Green Beret Networking Task Group—GBNT—in 2021, out of necessity. "We were trying to raise money to get our abandoned Afghan partners out," he said. "We decided, well, if we're going to do this, we need to make an official organization." A combat veteran learned non-profit tax law because his government would not return his calls.

The work has not stopped. Wells negotiated with a Taliban lawyer to free an interpreter who had been arrested at a checkpoint, tortured and sentenced to death after confessing he had worked for U.S. Special Forces. Wells wired \$1,700 to the man's brother to pay the "fine." The interpreter was released, relocated to another province and hospitalized for two weeks. He had been beaten so badly on the soles of his feet he could no longer walk.

"Now he is safe but still in hiding," Wells wrote in a message. The word 'safe' did not read the same as it normally did.

In late February 2026, Wells was working the phones as always. He talks about the calls he receives. Men who say they want to turn themselves in or kill themselves. One man's daughter—a small girl—came to her father and asked why they could not eat something that would make them go to sleep and not wake up again.

"When a little kid is saying that," Wells said, "that just breaks your heart."

Some of them have been hiding for five years. One young man and his family have lived in an underground cellar at a relative's house for four years. They cannot leave. There is no light at the end of the tunnel they can see.

"Most people—we're Americans, we can get on a plane and fly anywhere in the world," Wells said. "They are stuck."

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Janis Shinwari was born in Kabul. His father was a pilot.



Chris Wells, right, in Afghanistan at an undisclosed location and time with his friend Hallic, a former member of the Afghan Security Guards still on the move.

When the Taliban took the city in 1997, the family fled to Pakistan. Shinwari was a teenager. He worked construction and went to school. Life was not good but survivable and five years passed.

Then he watched the towers fall on CNN.

"I was like, I have to do something right against the Taliban and kick them out of my country," Shinwari said. He went back to Afghanistan. He became an English teacher. In late 2004, American soldiers came to his school and asked if anyone wanted to work as a translator. Shinwari thought it meant sitting in a nice office. The day after he passed the tests, he was in a Humvee. That evening the convoy was ambushed. "First time I'm watching people shooting from the same Humvee I'm sitting in," he said. "The Taliban, they're shooting at us. Oh my God, what's going on?"

Shinwari kept going. He served alongside the U.S. military for years. During a firefight in 2008, his American partner, Captain Matt Zeller, was knocked out of the fight. Shinwari picked up Zeller's rifle and shot the Taliban fighters closing on his position. He saved Zeller's life.

When Shinwari later applied for a Special Immigrant Visa, the process that was supposed to take nine months stretched into years. Zeller raised \$35,000 through crowdfunding to help him. Shinwari took the money and did something nobody expected. He asked Zeller to help him start a nonprofit instead.

"I was lucky," Shinwari said. "I had someone to fight for my rights. And I thought, there are thousands of others that there's nobody to fight for them. Why don't I make an organization and be their voice?"

That was 2013. The organization was called No One Left Behind.

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Andrew Sullivan, a veteran who now works with No One Left Behind, can recite the numbers from memory. He has to. They change every quarter when the State Department releases its report, and every quarter they tell the same story of institutional paralysis.

The facts, according to the most recent State Department quarterly report: it takes 1,025 days of government processing time to move a single SIV application through the pipeline. There are 11,823 principal applicants—the interpreters and allies themselves—who have already received Chief of Mission approval, meaning the government has verified they worked for the United States and are eligible for a visa. Add their 52,262 family members and you have 64,085 people the U.S. government has formally acknowledged it owes a debt to, still waiting for an interview.

Behind them stand another 45,860 principal applicants whose paperwork has been submitted but not yet reviewed.

"These will take years to process," Sullivan said. "Quite frankly, because we just have so many of them. We will be here for twenty years."

That was before everything ground to a halt. Officially the SIV program has not been shut down. It is written into law. But the machinery around it has been dismantled piece by piece. In January 2025, a stop-work order froze foreign assistance funding, cutting off government-funded travel for approved visa holders. Resettlement agencies were defunded. In December 2025, the Afghan SIV Unit paused all new Chief of Mission approvals.



A family is brought to safety in America.



Other families are in hiding still. The GBNT shows where their money goes.

On January 1, 2026, the State Department fully suspended visa issuance to Afghan nationals. A federal court ruled on February 6 that the government must continue processing cases already in the pipeline. But processing without entry is a door that opens onto a wall.

On November 26, 2025, an Afghan parolee who had arrived on the Biden airlift in 2021 shot and killed a National Guard soldier in Washington, D.C., and wounded another. Wells said almost every Afghan ally he works with reached out to express shame. They were ashamed to be Afghan. The shooter had worked with the CIA—not Special Forces, not as an interpreter. Wells believes the man had no support network when he arrived and simply broke. "I think he got here, he didn't have any support, he was doing everything he could to provide for his wife and five kids, and he just certainly lost it," Wells said.

Wells described the new reality in late February. An applicant can go through the entire process. Pass every gate. Get approved for a visa interview. But the visa will not be issued until the block on immigration is lifted. "So they can go through it, pass all the gates and everything, and they'll get stopped," he said.

Also, No One Left Behind helped fill the gap the only way it could. Since February 2025, the organization purchased airline tickets for more than 1,700 SIV holders and their families—from Pakistan, Albania, Qatar, Indonesia, Rwanda, Germany and France. It operates a safe house in Pakistan that shelters roughly 180 Afghans a month. Shinwari still receives messages every day from people begging for help.

"Every day," he said. "From Pakistan, from Afghanistan, from India. Hey Janis, please help us and take us to America. Please. Especially since the Trump administration came, these people really need to be evacuated from Afghanistan because they lost their hope."

He paused. "I was like, even if they do forget you, we won't. We will be here to raise your voice, fight for your rights."



Janis Shinwari, founder of NOLB.

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The comparison between Kabul and Saigon was made so many times it became a cliché. Biden denied it in July 2021: "There's going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy." Thirty-eight days later, helicopters evacuated the Kabul embassy. Blinken said on television, "This is manifestly not Saigon." The split-screen images said otherwise.

But the deeper parallel is not in the photographs. It is what happened after the cameras left.

After Saigon fell, the communist government sent between 200,000 and 300,000 South Vietnamese into re-education camps—former officers, officials, interpreters, anyone who had worked with Americans. Some estimates say as many as 165,000 died. The boat people crisis killed another 200,000 at sea. More than 1.6 million Vietnamese were eventually resettled, but the process took decades. Even though these numbers are riddled with scholarly disagreement, the suffering was documented, studied and remembered.

Remembered by everyone, it seems, except the people in a position to prevent it from happening again.

Wells understood the parallel before Kabul fell. He ran Robin Sage for years, the exercise where Green Beret candidates train with guerrilla forces in the fictional country of Pineland. The

role players who portray the guerrilla chief are instructed to be skeptical. "You know what the G chief says?" Wells said. "Why should I trust you? You left the Montagnards. You left the Vietnamese. Why should I believe you'll stay this time?"

Wells gets invited every year to Dega Day, a memorial gathering of the Montagnard community in the mountains of North Carolina—the indigenous people who fought alongside Special Forces in Vietnam and were abandoned when America left. Their descendants live in the Carolina hills now. "I said to Charlie, a Vietnam SF guy, look at the legacy you've brought about by bringing your friends back," Wells recalled. "He teared up. And I can't not think about that when I do this work."

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There is an interpreter Wells calls Lucky. The name is earned. The Taliban picked up Lucky while Wells was trying to get him out. He disappeared for weeks. When he surfaced again, he told Wells he had denied everything. He had deleted everything on his phone before they took him. They let him go. Then they realized their mistake. Now they are looking for him again.

Shinwari's family in Kabul has been raided twice. The Taliban came with a warrant. They searched the house. They have eyes on it, monitoring who comes and goes. Shinwari cannot go back. His nieces and nephews are still there.

And then there is Asad, whose name means lion. Wells got him out of Afghanistan on an umra visa—a religious permit to visit Mecca. It did not raise flags at the airport in Kabul. The Taliban waved him through.

The U.S. embassy in Saudi Arabia processed Asad's interview in two weeks. In Pakistan, the same step takes months. Asad called Wells and said he needed a ticket to the United States. Wells and his wife were leaving on a family trip to Arizona. They bought the ticket and brought Asad along.

"I wasn't just going to say, well, there's the refrigerator, we'll be back in two weeks," Wells said.

Asad lived with Wells and his family in San Antonio for six months. Wells guided him through every step—social security card, driver's license, job applications. Another organization had offered to resettle Asad in a city with a twenty percent unemployment rate, in an apartment complex full of Afghans. Wells said no. "That's a dead end, man. You're not going to thrive there."

Asad arrived on September 10, just before the immigration block took effect. He is now a security guard. He does deliveries. He has not taken a dollar of government funding.

"We sit around and I say, you know how lucky you are to have gotten here when you did," Wells said.

Meanwhile, actor Misha Collins—of all people—paid for ten airline tickets from Islamabad to the United States for an Afghan named Omar and his family, a man Wells had been working to evacuate since the beginning. It happened because Collins asked a friend if anyone was helping get Afghan allies out, and the



Asad holds up his green card.

friend happened to know someone who was. "Like I said," Wells wrote, "God will motivate someone to help when we are sometimes at our most desperate."

And Gul, another former interpreter Wells knows, sent word that his brother—also a former interpreter—was shot and killed in Houston, Texas. Shot in the back at a community mailbox by a stranger. No altercation. No argument. The shooter was arrested and released. The DA called it self-defense. The brother left behind a wife and two children, one nine years old and one four months.

The man survived Afghanistan to die in a country that had promised him safety.

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Here is the difference between Saigon and Kabul, and it is the only difference that matters: there is still time.

After Saigon, the re-education camps were sealed. The boats had already launched. The dying was already underway. The United States spent decades building resettlement programs to address a catastrophe that had already happened. The Vietnamese who survived did so largely despite American policy, not because of it.

The Afghan allies are not yet beyond reach. The SIV program is still law. The court has ordered continued processing. The 64,085 people with Chief of Mission approval are known by name. They are in Pakistan, in Albania, in safe houses run by nonprofits operating on donations because the government defunded everything else. They are hiding in Kabul, deleting their phones, burning their badges, moving every few weeks.

They are waiting.

Congress can authorize more visas. The executive branch can restart funded relocations. The State Department can resume Chief of Mission approvals and begin clearing the backlog it created. None of this requires new legislation from scratch. The architecture exists. The bipartisan support, or what remains of it, exists. What is missing is the political will to treat a promise as a promise.

Wells funds most of the GBNT's work out of his own pocket—a retired colonel on VA disability—and pays roughly

two hundred dollars a month per family for housing and food. He wrote a scathing appeal on a denial case and got the reviewer removed. He has spent \$1,800 to ship a DNA kit to Pakistan to resolve a passport clerical error. He talks about a "blood visa"—a counterpart to the administration's proposed golden visa for wealthy immigrants. "These guys have paid it in blood," he said.

"I will not give up until a hard door is shut in someone's face," Wells remembered writing in one of his appeals. "You may want to stop this process, but we will not give up, as long as there's a legal path to go forward with."

Sullivan put it simply: "People don't realize we still have all these interpreters and brothers and sisters in arms that are still in harm's way out there. Afghanistan has fallen out of the news. But they haven't fallen out of danger."

Shinwari, the interpreter who picked up a rifle and saved an American soldier's life, who turned a GoFundMe into a movement, said he would do it all again. "If I need to go, I will go," he said. He sounded like a soldier. He was never given the title.

Thieu's words hang in the air like helicopter exhaust. It is so easy to be an enemy. So difficult to be a friend. But unlike Saigon, unlike the camps and the boats and the decades of regret, the ending has not been written yet.

If you want to help: nooneleft.org. If you are a veteran with contacts who served alongside Afghan allies, the GBNT is looking for you: www.GBNTgroup.org. Both organizations need financial support for the day-to-day lives of our allies in hiding. If you are a citizen with a representative, the Fulfilling Promises to Afghan Allies Act in the Senate and the Enduring Welcome Act in the House need votes. The names on the State Department's list are real. The clock on their lives is real. The only question left is whether the next chapter reads like 1975 or like something better.

Ron Dahlgren contributed to this story.

Photos courtesy of Chris Wells. Janis Shinwari photo from nooneleft.org.

Project Green Light

By Jack Murphy



Freefall with SADM.

Photo provided by Jack Murphy

On a warm, clear night in 1983, an Army two-and-a-half-ton truck pulled into a hangar on Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina, and dropped its tailgate. One by one, about a dozen Green Berets from 7th Special Forces Group jumped down.

At the same time, an MC-130 Combat Talon, the special operations version of the venerable Hercules turboprop aircraft, taxied over to the hangar. The plane's ramp lowered and two men in black flight suits with no patches or other insignia disembarked. They began to give the Green Berets a mission brief as other trucks pulled up loaded with freefall parachutes and other equipment, including live ammunition.

"This is a classified operation," one of the briefers announced to the Special Forces A-team. "From this point forward, we have command and control."

Neither of the men in black ever identified themselves or which branch of the U.S. government they worked for.

Then three vehicles filled with security personnel pulled up. One of the vehicles also contained a box. Inside was a device

with which the Special Forces men were very familiar, as they had trained on an inert version of it for countless hours, with regular, rigorous inspections conducted to evaluate their competency and reliability in its use. The device that was unpacked and turned over to the team was a Special Atomic Demolition Munition or SADM (pronounced SAY-dum), a small nuclear weapon that contained a fissile core detonated with a dual-primed conventional explosive. The design of the device was not dissimilar to that of the original implosion atomic bomb developed at Los Alamos by J. Robert Oppenheimer and his team during World War II. The difference was this one was miniaturized to the point that it fit inside a rucksack.

Unlike the training device with which the team usually worked, this device had no "Inert" stickers or any other indication that it was anything but a live nuclear weapon. The mysterious men in the black flight suits told the Special Forces A-team, which in this case was known as a Green Light team because it specialized in infiltrating, emplacing, and detonating the

SADM, to rig the device for an airborne insertion. But the team still hadn't received a full operations order.

After preparing their parachutes, rucksacks and the SADM for a freefall jump behind enemy lines, the Green Light team loaded onto the MC-130 with the two men in black. Shortly afterward, they were airborne with no idea of where they were headed. Only when they were three hours into the flight did the men in operational control inform them of their target, according to one member of the team. It was a dam, a dam the team had analyzed and trained to strike many times. A dam in a hostile country.

They were about to jump into Cuba with a low-yield nuclear bomb.

Six hours later, the MC-130 dived to 500 feet above the ground, flying what aviators call "nap of the earth" to avoid detection by enemy radar. The Green Light team was soon given the directive to stand up, rig up, and prepare to jump from the back ramp of the aircraft, which was climbing steeply to an altitude of about 10,500 feet as it neared the drop zone.



Waiting for the call.

When they were over the DZ, the Green Berets walked to the lip of the ramp and stepped off into the night sky.

"I'm the third person off the ramp," said one member of the team, told The High Side. "We go out, we make a jump and land on an unmarked drop zone."

After successfully landing, the team assembled, checked their bearings and began moving out toward the target with their CAR-15 carbines locked and loaded.

Suddenly, headlights flicked on nearby, illuminating the team. "Endex, endex, endex!" someone in the darkness shouted. "Endex" is an abbreviation that the U.S. military uses to denote the end of a training exercise. The Green Berets were in a state of shock, having been led to believe they were on a live operation.

People supervising the event appeared out of the darkness, asking the team members in American-accented English about their current emotional state and how they felt about the would-be mission. Technicians from Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in Livermore, California, also emerged. Now that the team members knew they were on a training mission, the lab techs wanted to accompany them to see how they armed and emplaced the SADM.

It turned out they were on a drop zone somewhere in New Mexico, more than a thousand miles from Cuba.

The Green Berets were still reeling, their adrenaline pumping. They had assumed they were deep behind enemy lines until moments previously. "It was absolutely real," a team member said of how he felt right up until they heard the shouts of "Endex!"

He declined to name the target they thought they were attacking. But a former 7th Group soldier native to Cuba said that the most likely dam target in Cuba for a SADM team would be the Hanabanilla Dam in Villa Clara province, the country's largest hydroelectric dam.



Dropped by lowering line.

The team quickly finished the training exercise before catching a ride in a military vehicle to a nearby airstrip, from which they were flown back to Pope Air Force Base (which was collocated with the team's home post of Fort Bragg, now known as Fort Liberty).

The Green Light program was active from 1962 to 1986, a period during which Special Forces teams and other U.S. military units trained to clandestinely infiltrate small nuclear weapons behind enemy lines during World War III. Their targets were dams, bridges, ports and enemy troop formations.

"Beginning in the 1950s the Soviets had numerical superiority in Europe, so we went the route during the Eisenhower administration to make up for that with tactical nuclear weapons," former Green Beret Mike Vickers, who underwent SADM training, told The Team House podcast. "That [SADM] was part of that family."

But although the SADM is usually understood as a defense against a possible Warsaw Pact invasion of Western Europe, interviews by The High Side with more than a dozen former Green Light team members revealed plans to use the munitions across the globe, from Cuba to the Middle East to North Korea.

Many of the soldiers involved never saw an extraction plan – i.e., a plan to get them to safety once they'd accomplished their missions. As one Green Light team member said in a brief history of the program obtained by The High Side from U.S. Special Operations Command via the Freedom of Information Act, "You were under the impression that you were expendable."



Recovering the SADM after a jump.

The Pentagon shut down the Green Light program in the late 1980s, following a recommendation to do so from 1st Special Operations Command, the forerunner to Army Special Operations Command. That recommendation came after the command, based at Bragg, had reviewed the mission and the potential targets, according to the brief history of the program The High Side obtained via the Freedom of Information Act.

"After considering the large amount of resources needed to maintain mission capability, a lack of credible potential targets – and the unlikelihood of ever using these weapons, a recommendation was made that the mission be terminated," the history states.

Bowra, who took command of 5th Group's 2nd Battalion in

1988, soon got the word. “I was notified as battalion commander by the group commander that the mission was ended,” he told The High Side. The news came as “a relief,” said retired General Ken Bowra, grateful that the teams would no longer have to go through periodic inspections. “I got my teams back and we could focus on real missions and training.”

The Pentagon had three main reasons for closing down Green Light. The first was the development of precision-guided munitions that could be delivered by a variety of means that did not require soldiers sneaking behind enemy lines. The second was the growing sense among strategists that nuclear weapons were most useful as a strategic insurance policy for nations to hold as a credible threat, rather than to secure tactical battlefield objectives.

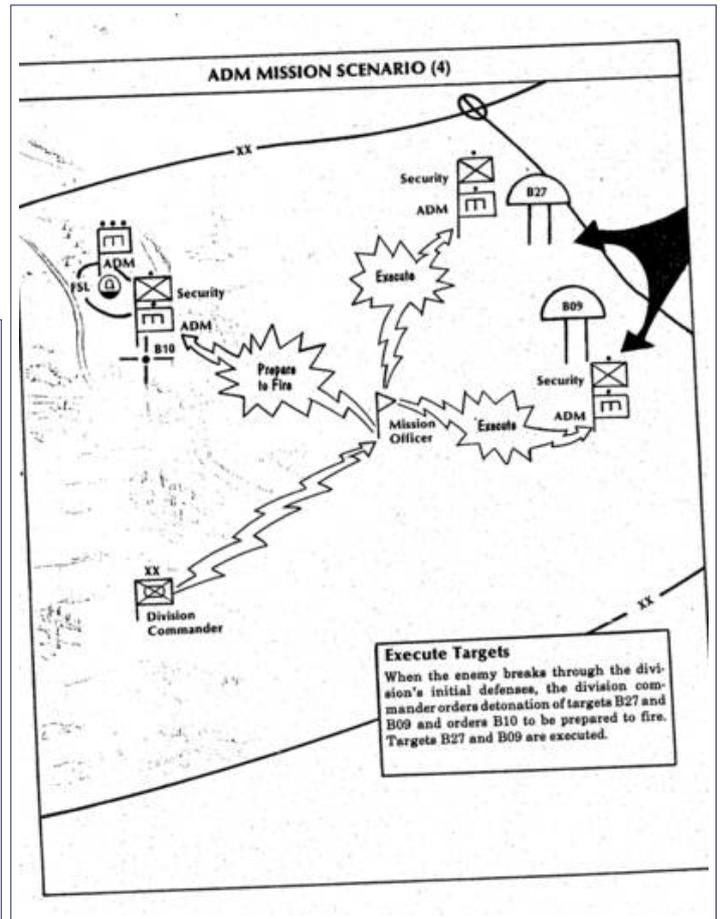


Worn on an ALICE frame.

Finally, at the time the Pentagon decided to shut the Green Light program down, the Cold War was in its final days. The Soviet economy was faltering. After their defeat at the hands of the mujahideen in Afghanistan, the Soviet armed forces no longer appeared as the threatening behemoth feared for so long by NATO’s military planners.

The ascension to power of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and the positive relationship he developed with Ronald Reagan marked a turning point. In 1987 Reagan traveled to Berlin and demanded, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” Two years

later, the Berlin Wall indeed came toppling down – at the hands of East Berliners. The Soviet menace in Europe evaporated, and with it the need for Green Light teams to jump behind the Iron Curtain with nuclear weapons in their rucksacks.



Sample mission.

The Green Light mission may have helped keep Special Forces alive through the 1970s, according to the brief history obtained from U.S. Special Operations Command. During this period, when the Pentagon wanted to forget its recent unpleasant experience with counterinsurgency in Southeast Asia and focus instead on winning a large-scale land war in Europe, Special Forces experienced cuts but was never disbanded, perhaps because of their high-priority nuclear mission.

“It was important,” Bowra said. “But it was overcome by events and technology.”

Editor’s Note: For more details about Green Light and other unbelievable previously unpublished chapters of Special Forces history, check out Jack’s book, *We Defy: The Lost Chapters of Special Forces History*, available on Amazon.

Invading Pineland

By Ron Dahlgren



Missions in Pineland

Photo by K. Kassens, USAJFKSWCS

Every few months, a war breaks out in rural North Carolina and almost nobody notices.

Farmers go about their chores. Diners fill their coffee cups. And somewhere in the pine-covered hills of the state's central counties, a dozen exhausted soldiers are crouched in the tree line, studying a man who may or may not be their enemy, deciding whether to trust him with their lives.

This is Robin Sage, the final and most storied examination in the path to becoming a United States Army Special Forces soldier, a Green Beret.

A Country That Doesn't Exist

Robin Sage is the U.S. military's premier unconventional warfare exercise and the final test of over a year's worth of training for aspiring Special Forces soldiers. The exercise's notional country of Pineland encompasses several counties in North Carolina. Robin Sage derives its name from the town of Robbins, N.C., a central area of operations for the exercise, originally, and former Army Colonel Jerry Sage, a World War II veteran and an Office

of Strategic Services (OSS) officer who taught unconventional warfare tactics.

Since the 1970s, Robin Sage, the culmination exercise for the SFQC, has been the litmus test for soldiers striving to earn the coveted Green Beret. Prior to 1974, similar exercises were held under the names Gobbler's Woods, Cherokee Trail, and SNOW-DROP.

The fictional country has its own backstory, its own currency (called the Don), and its own enemy: the United Provinces of Atlantica. Following a coup that deposes the legitimate government, the SF students work with role players to raise and train a guerrilla force that will fight the usurpers and attempt to restore the Pineland government.

Candidates are placed in an environment of political instability characterized by armed conflict, forcing soldiers to analyze and solve problems to meet the challenges of this "real-world" training.

The Road to Pineland

Robin Sage does not arrive without preparation. By the time a candidate steps off a plane or tumbles from a parachute into Pineland, he has already spent well a year or more in the Special Forces Qualification Course aka the "Q Course."

Chris Wells, a former Special Forces officer who later commanded a Robin Sage rotation, described the pipeline. "First, you got to get selected," Wells explained. "They say, okay, you have what it takes to make it through the special forces pipeline." From there, candidates move through Small Unit Tactics (essentially a compressed infantry training course) followed by their Military Occupational Specialty, or MOS, training. Each candidate trains in one of the core Special Forces specialties: weapons (18B), engineering (18C), medical (18D), communications (18E), or the officer track (18A).



Navigating the terrain.

Photo by K. Kassens, USAJFKSWCS

Of all the MOS tracks, the 18 Delta (the Special Forces Medical Sergeant) carries the longest and most demanding training. "The 18 Delta course, just that portion, lasts about 18 months," Wells said. "And it's very intensive." Candidates who wash out of the medical track are often recycled to the weapons sergeant course, sometimes arriving there with an EMT certification to show for it.

Following MOS training, candidates also attend language school and the Army's Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) program before they are finally deemed ready for

Robin Sage.

A DTIC publication from the early 1990s reports that only 45% of trainees made it through SFQC on the first try. The 18D course reported only 18% first time graduation rate for this same period!

Into the Field

The invasion of Pineland begins with infiltration. Depending on the iteration, students may infiltrate by static-line parachute jump, by air-land in a civilian aircraft, or even by truck. James McGinnis, an 18 Delta who went through Robin Sage in January 1989, described his team's entry: "We were supposed to jump in, but a huge winter storm hit that part of North Carolina. And so the jump was canceled, and we went in on a truck."

Jack Murphy, a weapons sergeant who went through in 2007, recalled a more clandestine approach. "I was on the pilot team. So we infiltrated on like a small single-engine plane... and we landed in a civilian airport." Murphy's pilot element had the task of laying the groundwork for the rest of the Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) to follow.

Robin Sage is a 19-day problem-solving field training exercise. During this unconventional warfare exercise, the students are required to apply the lessons learned from previous months of Special Forces MOS training and field training. Robin Sage involves approximately 100 Special Forces students, 100 counter-insurgent personnel (OPFOR), 200 guerrilla personnel, 40 auxiliary personnel, and 50 cadre. The local communities of North Carolina also participate in the exercise by roleplaying as citizens of Pineland.

Throughout the exercise, Special Forces candidates and Robin Sage role-players not only conduct training missions such as controlled assaults and key-leader engagements, but also live, eat, and sleep in these civilian areas.



Photo by K. Kassens, USAJFKSWCS



Guerrillas

Photo by K. Kassens, USAJFKSWCS

The G-Chief Problem

Once in the field, students must make contact with and gain the trust of a guerrilla force led by a "G-chief"; typically a retired Special Forces veteran playing the role of a suspicious, battle-hardened resistance commander. This is, by design, one of the hardest parts of the exercise.

"You show up and he's a complete jerk," Wells said. "He's got no trust in the U.S... you guys have always abandoned people, left us holding the bag. We don't want anything to do with you. And you better leave or we're going to kill you." The team leader's job, Wells explained, is to build rapport; to demonstrate through word, deed, and cultural sensitivity that the team is worthy of partnership. "Nine times out of ten, we kill off the team leader initially," Wells added, meaning the cadre scripted a leadership swap to evaluate the next man in line. "That's how we do a leadership swap. Building rapport with your host nation commanders is paramount."

Murphy remembered his own encounter with the G-chief vividly. "Who was an appropriately crusty old dude who chastised us and told us we suck and all this other stuff." The team had to earn their way into the guerrilla camp step by step. One of his most indelible memories came at the initiation ceremony: "Everyone else on the team pretended to drink the grog. I was at the end of the line... They said, 'Brother Murphy, you have to finish it.' And I was like, oh, fuck." What followed was a long pull of straight white vinegar and a hasty trip to the tree line.

McGinnis recalled a similar crucible. He had a misstep in

word choice that nearly derailed the relationship before it began. When the G-chief asked what the medic could offer his men, McGinnis offered to train anyone with the "aptitude" for medicine. "He said, 'Aptitude? You call my guys stupid?'" The lesson was immediate: every word matters when you're trying to build a relationship across a cultural and power divide.

Living in Pineland

Once welcomed into a guerrilla base camp, the ODA begins the heart of its mission: students accomplish their task of training, advising, and assisting the guerrillas. The training educates the guerrillas in various specialties, including weapons, communications, medical, and demolitions. The training is designed to enable the guerrillas to begin liberating their country from oppression.

This isn't just classroom work. McGinnis described training his indigenous fighters in camp sanitation and basic trauma management, "sticks and rags medicine," as he put it. All while simultaneously trying to keep a group of unmotivated role players engaged during a stretch of brutal January weather. "It either snowed, rained, or sleeted, or some combination of those three every day we were in the field," he said. "These kids were miserable. They just wanted to stay warm and get out of the field."

Murphy's team ran raids, recon missions, and conducted direct action against notional enemy positions with guerrilla forces augmenting the ODA. He also took on a solo intelligence gathering mission that required him to clean up, shave his beard, don a

suit and tie, and attend a church service in a nearby town, where a man in the pew slipped him a folded note containing intelligence to carry back to camp.

Of course, the events are sequenced faster than they would be in the real world because of time constraints in the course. Robin Sage notionally jumps forward in time. Week one be-

comes month three, month three becomes month six, etc. The time shifts allowing what would be a year-long unconventional warfare campaign into a few weeks of training. "They can't put you in the training for like a year," Murphy noted. "Sage is like a month."



Civilian areas

Photo by K. Kassens, USAJFKSWCS

The Civilian Dimension

Perhaps no feature of Robin Sage is more unusual than its reliance on the real civilian world. Landowners provide acreage for guerrilla base camps. Local volunteers play auxiliaries. Some missions unfold in actual towns, in actual diners, with actual bystanders watching from their usual seats.

Wells described urban missions where students had to identify and detain a target in a public space. "The students don't know this, but everybody in that town knows if it's going to happen that day. So a lot of people come out and observe." The police are notified and sometimes armed with blank-firing weapons to add realism. But that coordination is not foolproof and the consequences of a gap in communication can be catastrophic.

During a Robin Sage exercise on 23 February 2002, Moore County Deputy Sheriff Randall Butler shot and killed 1st Lieutenant Tallas Tomeny, 31, wounded Staff Sergeant Stephen Phelps, 25, and detained civilian volunteer Charles Leiber. While on patrol, Deputy Butler pulled over the three exercise participants after he determined their behavior indicated they might be searching for robbery targets. In the interest of playing along, they attempted to bribe Butler with Don, then MREs, not realizing that he had no idea about the staged operation or the fake currency.

Wells was in training at the time and knew the aftermath well. "The students did everything they were supposed to do. The

G-chief that was with him did everything he was supposed to do. His vehicle was marked. They tried bribing the police officer with Don." What investigators later determined was that the deputy had not received proper notification, and had a troubled service history at another department. The incident resulted in a class-wide protocol change: "When we went through, because we were the class immediately following that... they made sure we were in uniform. All Robin Sage classes, you could be in civilian clothes and whatnot. But when we went through... we were mitigating risk until they got everything ironed out."

The Bigger Picture

What Robin Sage ultimately develops in its candidates is something that is almost impossible to manufacture through conventional training: the judgment to operate alone, far from support, in an environment where every interpersonal decision carries tactical weight.

Wells put it plainly: "When you find yourself in the middle of Afghanistan, in the middle of the night, linking up with somebody who's basically hand-carrying you to a target, you don't know whether or not this guy is leading you into an ambush... you're like, okay, I'm living out a Robin Sage scenario right now."

Murphy drew the same connection, describing a 2014 experience as a journalist embedded with Kurdish guerrilla forces in

northern Iraq. "All of these Kurds are lined up and one by one going by, shaking each of their hands, saying hello, I'm Jack Murphy. It was exactly Robin Sage. It was like beat for beat." He attributed Robin Sage for his instinctive comfort in that moment: "And I am completely at the mercy of these people. There is no medevac. There is no air support. There's no nothing, I'm out there flapping. I'm totally reliant on these people. If I lose rapport with them, I'm going to die. I'm not coming back."

That, Murphy observed, is the deepest lesson of the exercise: "The thing about being in Special Forces is that your rapport is your security. You don't have a bunch of Joes to pull security for you all day and all night. Your security is the rapport you have with this partner force that likes you and wants to keep you alive."

By the conclusion of Robin Sage, the students have been placed in many situations where they were required to use MOS and leadership skills, and their abilities were tested to work in ad-

verse and ambiguous conditions. Those who pass receive something that no amount of conventional training can grant: a stamp of certification from the men who watched them perform, under realistic pressure, in an environment designed to break them down and rebuild them as Green Berets.

"It puts them in the most realistic scenario possible," Wells said, "to say: okay, you know how to do your job. You're competent at it. And we think that you will be able to serve on a Special Forces detachment."

For the paratroopers reading these pages, that last standard will sound familiar. It's the same one we hold ourselves to, every time we stand up and answer the call.

Chris Wells (2002) is a retired Special Forces officer and former Robin Sage cadre commander. Jack Murphy (2007) and James McGinnis (1989) are former Special Forces NCOs who served on ODAs following their qualification. All three spoke with The Canopy for this feature.

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